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Europe for citizens

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Tripartite EP Citizen Forum (AT/HU/SK)

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Good morning everyone, and thank you very much for your kind invitation to be here with you today at this first ever tripartite citizen forum. It's a pleasure to be here in Austria and to see so many young Europeans! I'm sure you've got plenty to say about Europe and what it means to you to be a citizen of the EU, especially here where three different countries, languages and cultures come so close together.

As a European Commissioner, you have to be pretty thick-skinned. There are plenty of people out there in the media (and in some governments I have to say!) who like nothing better than criticising the Commission, and the EU in general. In the three years or so that I've been a Commissioner, I've heard them all, I can tell you: we've been accused of being everything from Stalinistic and autocratic to un-democratic and a waste of money!

But one of the most regular criticisms is that the EU is disconnected from reality and unaware of the real challenges facing the 500 million European citizens – criticism that I believe is unfair and incorrect. After all, the people who work for the EU, the 56,000 civil servants, are all citizens themselves and share the same concerns and ideals as all of you. Plus, the history of the EU is full of examples of how European countries working together towards a common goal has been of massive importance and benefit to citizens: the right to live, work or travel wherever you want; the opportunity to study in another Member State through schemes such as Erasmus; lower mobile roaming costs, and so on. Billions of euros in EU funds have helped build new roads, bridges, or railways; helped regenerate communities affected by the loss of industries; helped give Europeans healthy, affordable, quality food. And there are many, many more examples that show without a doubt that Europe's actions are very much citizen focused.

But it is true that the people of Europe probably feel that they have little or no say in the way in which the EU is run, and that was one of the reasons why we decided to create the European Citizens' Initiative, to give the 'real' people of Europe a chance to put an issue of importance to them on the EU policy-making agenda.

Very briefly, let me explain how it works, in case you don't already know. Initiatives must be proposed by a citizen's committee made up of seven individuals from at least seven different Member States, and must be in an area where the Commission has the power to act. If it meets these criteria, the initiative has a year to gather one million signatures from across the EU in its support. Once this threshold is reached, the Member States check that all the signatures are valid and that there is the correct geographical spread; if this is the case, Commission representatives will meet the organisers so they can explain in detail the issues raised in their initiative and the organisers will also have the opportunity to present their initiative at a public hearing in the European Parliament. The Commission will then finally make a formal response spelling out what action it will propose, if any, and the reasons for doing or not doing so.

The ECI was launched on 1 April this year, and we already have half a dozen initiatives that have been approved by the Commission and which are now starting to collect their signatures of support. The range of issues they cover is very wide: one concerns mobile telephone roaming charges, another animal welfare, while a third calls for all EU residents to have the right to vote in their country of residence rather than nationality. The very first one registered was about mobility and making it

easier for European citizens, in particular young people, to study and work abroad with help from the EU.

As you can see, even in the first few ECIs, there's a wide range of issues being discussed, and they are really and truly citizen-led, not being pushed by big companies trying to influence the Commission or even by NGOs pushing a particular issue.

I'm very excited about the ECI, because it really for the very first time offers the people of Europe not only the opportunity to set the EU policy agenda but also means that people from all four corners of the EU will be talking to each other about the things that really matter to them in their day-to-day lives. Thank heavens we have social media to help with this! I really don't think that ECIs would work without social media – although the organisers of initiatives don't have to use it, of course – and the power that it has to bring people together around a shared point of view.

If you haven't seen the ECI website yet, go and have a look for yourselves what people have proposed, and if you're old enough to vote in the European Parliament elections, you can even sign up to support one or more of the initiatives, if you want to.

I am looking forward already to the day when the first ECI reaches the one-million signature mark and we will move one step closer to the first piece of European legislation proposed by citizens themselves. This will be a great day for European democracy!

It is appropriate, I suppose, that the ECIs already registered will have to reach that threshold of 1m names by early 2013 (one year after they were registered) as next year will be the European year of citizens.

Did you know that we've all had the right to call ourselves that for nearly 20 years (although maybe not so many of you were around 20 years ago!)? I wonder, do you think of yourselves as European citizens? If so, what does that mean to you? Do you know what rights you have as a citizen of the EU? And how can you use those rights?

We've already talked about some of the rights of EU citizens – such as the freedom to travel, work or study wherever you want. But there are many more that we take for granted but which without the EU would probably not exist. If you take up the right to live in another country, you also need the right to work there and to have your education and skills recognised wherever they were earned. If you fall ill or have an accident, you want the right to be treated and reimbursed; if you move between different countries, you need to be certain that the rights you've earned (to a pension, for example) can travel with you. All of these things, I'm glad to say, are possible as a citizen of the EU.

We've asked a lot of people across Europe what they think about being an EU citizen and what it means to them, and it is really surprising to hear how little they

really know! They most of them know that they can live where they like in any Member State, but most of them also say that this is far too difficult – and not just because they don't speak the language! – which is partially because they don't know enough about their rights and how they are designed to make it easy for EU citizens to take full advantage of this freedom of movement.

That's why we want 2013 to be the European Year of Citizens, as this will give us a great chance to tell people what their rights as EU citizens are and to encourage them to use those rights a bit more! Of course, the right to participate in EU democracy – not just though the right to vote in European Parliament elections but now also the right to propose or support ECIs – is one area that we will focus on specifically in 2013.

It's always hard to predict the future, and I seem to have forgotten my crystal ball today! But I'd like to end with a few thoughts about how you might see Europe when you get to my age (which is not that far into the future!!)

Will you, I wonder, think of yourselves as European citizens first and Austrians, Slovaks and Hungarians second? Will the thought of living and working, raising a family, buying a home in another EU country fill you with fear, or will it be as easy and simple to you as doing it in your own country? Will you feel confident that the EU listens to you, that the people making the rules in Brussels or elsewhere really know what matters to you? Will it be second nature to you to get together with your friends and family across Europe to suggest ways in which those law makers could make life easier and better for all of you, and will you be certain that they'll listen to your suggestions?

Well, I certainly hope so!

Thanks for listening and I'm looking forward to hearing what you have to say as European citizens!